

## **PHYSICAL THERAPY & OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY ASSISTANTS TRANSCRIPT:**

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Stephanie Puffer: You have an opportunity to work in a way that someone is grateful for you every single day. Grateful for your knowledge. Grateful for your kindness. Not very many people get to live their professional life like that. I think that's a really special thing.

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Charles Fowler: One of the great things about this job is people are always going to need you. You're never not going to need somebody to help you get better. So there's such a high demand for this job. When I graduated and I started applying, I had, I think, five job offers within about three weeks.

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Regina Sitterley: If you love people and love coaching and love setting goals and love helping other people reach their goals, I think that OT is the best career ever. I've been in OT for 22 years and I love it.

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Narrator: 98.7% of our students earn a career. Today's episode is jam packed with a look at the Physical Therapist Assistant and Occupational Therapy Assistant programs at Chattahoochee Technical College. We're going to call it PTA and OTA because, like I said, we're jam packed. We're going to speak to award winning current students, proud instructors, graduates, the program directors of each program and employers. There's no time to waste. So let's meet the Dean of Health Sciences, Stephanie Puffer.

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Stephanie Puffer: I've been the Dean for two years, and prior to that I was the Program Director for the Physical Therapist Assistant program. About six years before that, I was the clinical coordinator for that program. I've done all the jobs in those programs.

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Narrator: Now, what is the difference between OTA and PTA?

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Stephanie Puffer: Both of these professions are going to make a huge difference in the lives of the people that they work with. I often like to say that our paramedic students are going to save lives and our OTA's and PTA's are going to improve the quality of their lives. OTA specifically are going to help people not only overcome an injury and illness or disability, but they're specifically going to work with them on what we call activities of daily living. So all of those things that we, most of us take for granted, the ability to be independent with feeding and bathing and toileting and dressing, that's one of the key focuses for OTA. They also work with their patients around mental health. They work with a lot. There's more opportunities to work with pediatrics. For someone who is interested in Pediatrics, probably a few more opportunities to do that with OTA than there is with PTA. OTAs can work in a variety of settings everything assisted livings, hospitals, schools, skilled nursing facilities, outpatient clinics, just an enormous number. Even workplaces like some factories and that kind of thing, both work on like stretching and movement exercises. But the goal for those exercises are different. So the OTA is going to be work on strengthening stretching but specific to help them accomplish one of those activities of daily living, whereas PTA is more likely to be doing that mobility for the bigger, most more gross motor tasks. Although both professions can do fine motor tasks, both professions can do like hand therapy and that kind of thing. PTA is also focused a lot on not just range of motion strength flexibility, but they also work on things like improving their balance, improving coordination and helping to relieve pain.

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Narrator: Can the student do either profession? Is there a type of personality that works better as one or the other?

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Stephanie Puffer: The most creative people I've ever met in my whole life have been occupational therapists or occupational therapist assistants, whereas the students that are interested in PTA have a real interest in how the human body works, a lot of times they were athletes either in high school or in college, although that is definitely not a prerequisite to being a PTA. They also can have an enormous impact on the lives of their patients.

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Narrator: Let's talk big picture and longevity here. How does the future of these professions look?

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Stephanie Puffer: The Bureau of Labor Statistics has both professions growing as much faster than average, more than 30% between 2020 and 2030. The average salary for PTAs, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, is around \$50,000. We're getting feedback that our students are making about that 50 55,000 a year. For OTA, also same thing much faster than average. Their median salary, according to the BLS, is \$60,000 a year right now. And I think it's a little less than that in Georgia. But it's still it's still it's still a solid salary for a two year degree. I mean, it's not an easy two year degree, but it's a two year degree going to make a good salary.

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Narrator: What's driving that growth?

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Stephanie Puffer: The biggest thing really is the aging baby boomers. And we're living longer than ever. So that means our joints are wearing out before our bodies wear out. So that's joint replacement. So PTA work with hip and knee replacements, of course, and and shoulder replacements. But OTAs also work with upper extremity. So shoulder elbow hand patients.

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Narrator: You know what, my 70 year old grandmother, she's really getting into pickleball. Maybe OTA is what she needs to turn pro.

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Stephanie Puffer: Yes. Oh, pickleball. Absolutely. Yeah.

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Narrator: Thank you, Stephanie. Now let's roll out the red carpet. It's time for our award winning student, Brianna Miller. Brianna, come introduce yourself and get your crown. I don't really have a crown. Sorry.

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Brianna Miller: Hello. My name is Brianna Miller. I am currently a Occupational Therapy Assistant student at Chattahoochee Technical College, and I graduate in December of 2023. I'm also the current GOAL student winner. I was nominated by my Program Director and one of my instructors, Dr. Amy Schaefer. It was amazing to be able to be recognized for my leadership skills, and I'm so grateful to be able to tell my story, tell how I got to technical college. I didn't get here on like a straight and narrow path, but I feel like that's the beauty of technical colleges, is that you don't have to take a straight and narrow path to get here. You just have to get here.

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Narrator: How'd you get into occupational therapy?

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Brianna Miller: I got super sick. I had blood clots in my lungs on December 31st of 2016, a month and a half prior to that, my aunt, who I am super, super close with, she had a major stroke. While I was in the hospital. My aunt came to visit me with her occupational therapist. I saw that and I was like, That was so cool. Like, I want to do that. And then as I think back further, my grandma, she passed away from health complications with Alzheimer's. She was one of the reasons I thought I wanted to go into PT, but on top of helping people like get physically better, I wanted to have that compassionate component of helping you get better through meaningful activities and doing the things that you love. I always have had a heart to help people and I've always been super, super creative. Occupational therapy kind of meets at a crossroads of caring about your physicality muscles and being creative in the interventions that you come up with and then having that compassion and that empathy for people and understanding that you have meaningful things that you need to do that aren't just waking up, brushing your teeth, going to work, but hanging out with your friends, having hobbies, all of that stuff. So having that three point crossroads, that's kind of where occupational therapy fits in.

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Narrator: Can you please explain what occupational therapy is?

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Brianna Miller: Occupational therapy got its start in the early 1900s, late 1800s. And it really picked up around the world wars because they needed rehabilitation aids for soldiers coming back home and having to learn how to deal with life and do life with their new injuries. We help people get back to those meaningful activities that you have to accomplish. Your job of being a human being happy, healthy and whole.

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Narrator: What would you say is the most rewarding part of being an OTA?

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Brianna Miller: Knowing that what I will do will be able to give people the ability to live and enjoy life, like be able to participate anywhere in no matter the size is a win in occupational therapy, I feel.

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Narrator: What are student benefits of being in classes with the same cohort?

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Brianna Miller: While you're in school you grow a bond and you learn great interpersonal skills with having a cohort that's from different backgrounds. We learn that we are really good sample piece of what the reward is going to look like. We're not going to get people who think like us, who look like us, who talk like us, who have every single of the same beliefs like us. No matter what background your patient comes from, no matter what background you come from, your job is to help them. And the thing is, is with occupational therapy, I have found that no matter what a person's belief is, you will find a common ground.

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Narrator: Thanks, Brianna. Let's talk to an OTA graduate now. Hey, Casey, tell us a little bit about yourself.

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Casey Jones: My name is Casey Jones. I am a coda slash L, which means I am a certified occupational therapy assistants and licensed. And I graduated from the Chattahoochee Tech program in 2018.

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Narrator: Can I get this education anywhere in Georgia?

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Casey Jones: Occupational therapy is not offered by many schools in Georgia. At the time that I was looking for the program, it was only offered by two schools total.

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Narrator: And why should a student choose Chatt Tech?

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Casey Jones: Well, at Chatt tech, the teachers really do care about your success. I am still in contact with my old teacher and I know she still manages the program. The labs were very hands on and I still use a lot of what I learned in the labs today. We were able to custom fabricate splints and everything that you would need for the therapy world. They were able to offer it.

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Narrator: Can you talk a little bit about the continued benefit of being in a cohort?

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Casey Jones: The cohort allows for more developed friendships and friendships that lasts due to the fact that we're in the same intense. two year program and it's us together and we're going through the same problems and difficulties, and then we're in the same field. And the therapy world we all know each other. I'm still in contact with all of my cohort, just about even. We refer each other to jobs and help each other out with questions in case of specialties that we run into that one of us might be specialized in at this point that we weren't specialized in. Now, therapy offers a lot of specializations, and as we all went down our own path, we were able to share with one another. The cohort class is really fantastic for networking your career.

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Narrator: What are some of the personal qualities that help a potential student?

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Casey Jones: If you are joining this program, it is good to be empathetic, compassionate, quick learner, able to think on your feet and flexible.

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Narrator: What do you like most about being an OTA?

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Casey Jones: The fact that I am able to change someone's life and affect it permanently. For example, if I have a patient that someone told them they would never walk again and then three months later I'm able to get them walking again and they start crying. Those moments are what makes me happy with my career.

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Narrator: Let's talk to the lead instructor of the OTA program, Dr. Amy Schaffer. What advice do you have for someone who might be thinking about restarting their career?

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Amy Schaffer: I think the hardest part of making that decision to go back to school, if it's, you know, changing the trajectory of what you were doing, is to give yourself permission that it's okay to change your goal and realize that maybe the goal that thought I wanted isn't quite the goal that I want anymore now that I've gotten this close to achieving it. So that was the hardest part for me, was it wasn't giving me the inner peace of going to work every day that I have now in the field. And one of the great things I think here about Chatt Tech is that there's a lot of people here that are in that same space that everybody's not brand new. Fresh from high school and in classes, we have students from high school on up. Some folks, even in their 60s or 70s, they're taking classes here that have realized like, this is an opportunity for me to change my goal or to achieve a goal that I started a long time ago. And it's comfortable. Like if you walk down the halls here, you fit in no matter what your age, no matter what you look like, there's somebody else like you going to school here.

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Narrator: Can you give us a little more explanation on the types of things students are going to be studying.

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Amy Schaffer: A lot about different medical conditions, both physical and mental health, as well as cognitive health conditions. We have courses in pediatric development and pediatric health care issues. We have, of course, in geriatric issues where you learn about the older adult aging process. We also have classes that develop ones what we call therapeutic use of self, which is using your personality as part of your skilled intervention. We also cover, of course, things such as preparing for your career, interviewing licensure regulations, certification regulations and entering the profession.

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Narrator: Go ahead and brag about Chatt Tech facilities or lab life for the OTA program.

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Amy Schaffer: In our lab, we have a blend of work areas that mimic the home environment, but also mimic areas that one might see out. We have a fully functional kitchen with a refrigerator, stove oven, dishwasher, sink, kitchen cabinets that also doubles as our orthotics fabrication lab. So we use the countertops as a workspace for one more fabricating orthotics. We have a

designated hospital room simulation area, a bariatric lab to simulate working with persons of size. We have a student breakroom space in our classroom. We're really fortunate that all of our students have access to a computer workstation in our classroom, but we also have some group work tables so that we can easily move from rows of computers and students to where they can have a communal, rounded table space to work face to face with one another.

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Narrator: All right. Now, here's the question I think a lot of people listening are probably wondering, when do I start making the big bucks?

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Amy Schaffer: Before you can make the big bucks you have to sit for what is called our national certification exam, which all occupational therapy practitioners must take in successfully pass before they can obtain their state license, which would allow them to practice occupational therapy in the state of Georgia. And at that point, they're ready to go out into the field and work for occupational therapy. Gives you the opportunity to find that niche that makes you happy, but it also gives you the opportunity to reinvent yourself later. If you're tired of that niche and move on to a different place in the therapy space. That's one of the wonderful things about occupational therapy is that you have the opportunity to mold yourself and remake yourself and still be working in the field that you love.

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Narrator: Let's speak with an employer in the industry with the owner of Home Therapy Solutions. Please stand up.

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Regina Sitterley: Yup. I'm Regina. My company is called Home Therapy Solutions.

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Regina Sitterley: We've been.

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Regina Sitterley: In business now for two and a half years. I'm an occupational therapist by trade. I graduated in 2002, and almost all of my experience has been in home health. In other words, working in the home with senior citizens.

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Narrator: Tell us a little bit about your company.

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Regina Sitterley: Home Therapy Solutions is all about empowering seniors to stay at home. So the significant majority of our population, you know, the average age is probably about 80. I would say my favorite people are about 90, though.

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Narrator: Can you imagine how much of a pickleball hero my grandmother is going to be when she's 90? What was your motivation for creating this company?

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Regina Sitterley: To me, occupational therapy in the home is exactly what occupational therapy should be, especially with seniors, because their activities of daily living all are in the home. So it makes perfect sense that we would see them in their most functional environment. We have very few competitors in our area doing this. You could go to an outpatient clinic. Of course, that's not going to be very functional because it's in a setting that's not their own setting. So this the mobile outpatient is a very new concept.

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Narrator: And what's the most important thing that you look for in hiring?

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Regina Sitterley: We are extremely independent. I might not ever see another clinician until we have a team meeting. So I need someone who is very competent and independent as well as a good communicator, having an education that I can count on and trust. You know, I know that

the therapist when when one of our team members goes to see a patient, I know that that patient is getting good quality care. I believe they have a very collaborative environment where they feel free to say, Here's what I'm dealing with. What do you think about this?

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Narrator: Thanks, Regina. Now let's talk to the PTA lead instructor, Dr. Aaron Freeman. Dr. Freeman, tell us a little bit about your background.

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Aaron Freeman: I started a Chatt Tech about two years ago. My background is in clinical practice as a physical therapist. I worked at Piedmont Hospital for several years as their lead spine therapist. Before that, I worked in an outpatient clinic for several years. I started at Tech as an adjunct instructor, just teaching one class part time, and then eventually I moved out to be the program director again, like I said about two years ago,

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Narrator: What's one quality that a PTA student can't live without?

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Aaron Freeman: I do think you do need to have a drive to work with the general public, to work with often people who are not feeling well because that's the whole reason why they're in physical therapy is because they have some sort of health or medical problem. I have a big love for not having a desk job and I don't work alone or in a lab. That's something that you would want to prefer as well, is that you also would want to work with the public and not work alone.

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Narrator: Chatt Tech is a very hands on school and PTA is a very hands on profession. I feel like there might be a good bit of bookwork in class though, am I right?

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Aaron Freeman: That's a little bit of a loaded question because of all the hands on knowledge that we use, of which there's quite a bit. We teach physical like manual skills how to do things like massage and joint mobilizations and passive movements where you move the person's body for them. So we teach lots of physical manual movements, but they're also all based in academic knowledge because you can't safely do massage or you can't safely do like advanced joint mobilization technique without understanding the anatomy and the physiology and the pathology of everything that's behind those movements. It's behind those motions. So it's a little bit of a loaded question. We have a. I would say it's it's a pretty good mix of academic and physical knowledge. That's actually something that a lot of people really enjoy about the profession is you take all of your academic knowledge, we teach all these things and then we turn it around and use it and apply it.

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Narrator: And what does the job market look like right now?

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Aaron Freeman: Well, right now the job market is red hot for physical therapy assistance. There are so many openings, the job market is so hot that they're willing to hire people who don't who literally can't even practice yet. They're just hoping that they will pass their exam and they'll be ready.

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Narrator: Thanks, Dr. Freeman. Finally, let's speak with a graduate of the PTA program, Charles Fowler. Tell us a little bit about yourself and when you graduated from Tech.

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Charles Fowler: Hi, my name is Charles Fowler. I graduated from the Chattahoochee Technical College Physical Therapist Assistant program in December of 2022, and I am currently employed as a physical therapist assistant with PT Solutions.

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Narrator: What made you choose PTA?

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Charles Fowler: I have always been interested in helping people recover from injuries or kind of improve their physical fitness. I got very interested into in the gym and working out about 9 or 10 years ago. And then I have been through physical therapy myself with football injuries in high school, which is a pretty common theme for a lot of people. They get injured and they experience the patient side of physical therapy and then they get interested in becoming a physical therapist or a physical therapist assistant themselves. And so that's what ended up drawing me to Chattahoochee Tech. As I looked around, I saw that they had a great program. It was very highly spoken of, so I got interested and applied.

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Narrator: How did Chatt Tech become such a good resource for the PTA industry?

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Charles Fowler: I think a big reason of that is because they keep things so personal in the program. They don't accept a whole lot of people, the people they do accept. It's very difficult to get into that program because they keep the classes so small so that they can give you as much time and attention as you need to make sure that you are getting through the class. Something that Chattahoochee Tech does really well is they keep the classes small and they help each individual person get through the program. We all have different strengths and weaknesses. I'm I'm not good if I have to sit in a classroom and listen to a lecture, I'm going to miss half the information versus when we're in the lab and we're doing stuff hands on. I pick it up really, really quick. And my teachers always noticed that. So they knew to help me with lecture stuff. They knew to give me study tips. They knew to try and help me focus on getting information from the lecture because they knew once I was in the lab they didn't have to pay as much attention to me because they could just show it to me once and I was going to get it. And I think that's something that they did really, really well, that other schools may not do so well because they're just trying to fit as many students as possible into each cohort every year.

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Narrator: What did you find the most interesting at Chatt Tech?

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Charles Fowler: When we first got accepted into the program, one of the first things you do is you have an orientation day and part of that is the previous cohort. So the current seniors come in and do a Q&A session. And one of the things the seniors in that class talked about was how close they became with their classmates. And they said they become like your family and they are the people you rely on going through this course because nobody else understands, none of your family understands, none of your friends understand because this is a specialized field and the only people who are experiencing it with you are your classmates. And I sat there and listen to that and I was like, Yeah, sure, whatever. I'm kind of an introvert, so I'm not really going to become good friends with my classmates. I'll just go through and do the work. But by the end of it you do. You become so close with all of your classmates because you're all going through this incredibly difficult and stressful program, and the only people that get it are the people who are sitting next to you while you're taking your final and you're stressing out. So for someone like me who like I was saying, I do really well in the lab, I could help people get their palpation skills down. I could help them remember the special tests. I had no problem if somebody was doing something to me. I'm like, Well, you're not really on that muscle. You're kind of on this muscle. Move your hand here. And it was like, Oh, thank you, I understand it. And then you flip it. And I would ask that same person who was having something, who was struggling in lab, I'd turn around and be like, I need a mnemonic to remember this set of muscles or something. And they would have something. They're like, Oh, well, I used this and it really helped me remember it. And I was like, Oh my goodness, thank you. Now I can start studying that and stop worrying about how I can't remember things. So having those friends together really helps you throughout the whole program.

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Narrator: Charles Why should a student choose PTA?

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Charles Fowler: First off, there's so much demand for this. We are always going to be in need. People are always going to hurt themselves. They're always going to injure themselves. And people need to know how to get better because if you just sit on the couch. And hope that your body is going to heal. It'll heal, but you're not going to be where you want to be and you're not going to heal as well as you could. I think that's one of the great things about this job, is people are always going to need you. You're never not going to need somebody to help you get better. So there's such a high demand for this job. When I graduated and I started applying, I had, I think, five job offers within about three weeks. Sometimes you just get to sit there and to watch people's faces when you explain to them how much they have gotten better or to see them come in on their last day of therapy and they're like, When I came in here, I could barely

walk. And now I'm back running. And that look on their face and that appreciation they express to you makes everything worth it.

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Narrator: Stephanie Chat Tech has a lot of street cred with this program. What makes it special?

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Stephanie Puffer: Those students, those students are passionate about what they want to do, as are our faculty in both of those programs, very passionate and protective over their profession. Their standards are and ethical integrity is extremely high. So our students come out really knowing what they're doing. And that's very well known in the community. I have graduates that have gone through the PTA program that have told me time and time again they're on an interview for their first job and they say that their employer pretty much says, well, you graduated from Chatt Tech, we know we're going to hire you. So that really means something in our community.

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Narrator: Both PTA and OTA are thriving career opportunities in the medical field, and both professions can improve their patients quality of life. Physical therapists assistants help patients who are injured or seriously ill cope with pain, increase range of motion and improve endurance, while occupational therapy assistants focus on activities that are important to their patient's daily lives. OTA's will need to be creative and those who are structured may enjoy life as a PTA. If you'd like to learn more about either of these rewarding careers, visit [Chattahoochee Tech. Edu](http://ChattahoocheeTech.edu). Thanks for listening to 98 7 Chatt Tech where 98.7% of our students earn a career.